

Beyond Deficit Thinking: Providing Access for Gifted African American Students

Donna Y. Ford
J. John Harris III
Cynthia A. Tyson
Michelle Frazier Trotman

Nationally, African American students are underrepresented in gifted education programs, and educators everywhere seek ways to identify more gifted Black students. This article addresses a central question in gifted education: How can we recruit and retain more African American students in our gifted programs? The authors review factors affecting the persistent underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education and offer suggestions for recruiting and retaining these able students. The authors' major premise is that a deficit orientation held by educators hinders access to gifted programs for diverse students. This thinking hinders the ability and willingness of educators to recognize the strengths of African American students. Too often, educators interpret differences as deficits, dysfunctions, and disadvantages; thus, many diverse students gain the "at risk" label. We contend that educators must move beyond a deficit orientation in order to recognize the strengths of African American students. Changing our thinking about differences among children holds great promise for recruiting and retaining culturally diverse students in gifted education.

Donna Y. Ford is a Professor in the Special Education program at The Ohio State University. Dr. Ford teaches courses in gifted education and conducts research on the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education. She also writes extensively on multicultural education and gifted underachievers. Donna is on the editorial board of the *Roeper Review* and consults with school districts nationally. J. John Harris III is a Professor of Education, specializing in educational administration and law. He also holds a position in the College of Arts and Science at

the University of Kentucky. He and Donna Ford recently published *Multicultural Gifted Education* (1999). Cynthia A. Tyson is an Assistant Professor in the College of Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University. She teaches courses in global, multicultural education and social studies education. Her research is in the areas of social justice and children's literature. Michelle Frazier Trotman is a doctoral student in the Special Education Program at The Ohio State University. She is a former special education teacher and coach in an urban public school system. Her primary interests are at-risk students and underachievement in urban settings.

Concern for the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted programs dates back to Jenkins' (1936) studies of Black students with high intelligence test scores who were not formally identified as gifted.¹ This lament has continued each decade since. For instance, in 1950, the Educational Policies Commission noted the tragic waste of Black talent:

Lacking both incentive and opportunity, the probabilities are very great that, however superior one's gifts may be, he will rarely live a life of high achievement. Follow-up studies of highly gifted young Negroes, for instance, reveal a shocking waste of talent—a waste that adds an incalculable amount to the price of prejudice in this country (p. 33).

Even today, nearly a half-century since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) made school desegregation the law of the land, gifted African Ameri-

can students continue to be underidentified. Gifted education, too often, remains racially segregated, with students of color being underrepresented and underserved.

Harris and Ford's (1991) review of the literature revealed that fewer than 2% of the articles and scholarly publications focused on gifted minority learners. Ford (1998) conducted another search of articles in five gifted education journals between 1966 and 1996, and as Table 1 shows, she found that only 36 of 2,816 focused on Black students. Ford also found that the vast majority of that research and literature focused heavily on the recruitment (that is, the identification and assessment) of Black students for placement in gifted programs. Almost no attention focused on their retention, on strategies for ensuring that minority students experience success once identified and placed.

This article reviews the literature on the identification and placement (i.e., the recruitment) of Black students into programs for gifted learners. Our premise is that the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education extends beyond identification instruments and assessment processes, and that a "deficit perspective" exists whereby students of color who are culturally different from their white counterparts are viewed as culturally deprived or disadvantaged. This deficit perspective regarding cultural diversity keeps educators from recognizing the gifts and talents of African American students. Finally, we maintain that educators must aggressively seek ways both to recruit and to retain African American students in gifted education.

ERIC Search of Articles on Racially and Culturally Diverse Students in Selected Gifted Education Journals (1966 to 1996)

Journal	Total number of articles	Asian American students	Hispanic American students	American Indian students	African American students
Gifted Child Quarterly	781	1	2	2	4
Gifted Child Today	553	1	1	2	3
Journal for the Education of the Gifted	335	2	4	2	7
Roeper Review	876	2	2	3	16
Gifted Education International	271	0	0	0	6
TOTAL	2,816	6	9	9	36

Note: The searches were conducted using key words *gifted*, *gifted and minority*, *gifted and Black* or *African American*, *gifted and Hispanic*, *gifted and Indian*, and *gifted and Asian* (From "The underrepresentation of minority students in gifted education: Problems and promises in recruitment and retention" by Donna Y. Ford, 1998, *The Journal of Special Education*, 32, p. 5. Copyright date by PRO-ED, Inc. Reprinted with permission.)

Table 1

¹ The terms "Black" and "African American" are used interchangeably in this article.

Manuscript submitted December, 1999.
Revision accepted October, 2000.

Possible Misinterpretations of Cultural Orientations

Characteristic	Description	Possible Misinterpretation
Oral Tradition	Strong preference for oral modes of communication; students speak frankly, directly, and honestly; students enjoy playing with language (puns, jokes, innuendoes, storytelling, etc.).	Frankness and bluntness may be perceived as rudeness and lacking in social skills. Creative language may not be appreciated; if students speak Black English vernacular, they may be considered less intelligent.
Movement and Verve	A strong need to be actively involved, mobile; psychomotor preferences.	Student may be viewed as hyperactive, inattentive, and immature.
Communalism	Interdependence; preference for social or group learning; dislike for individual competitiveness.	The desire to work with others may be perceived as immaturity, lacking independence, and even cheating!
Affective	Expresses self easily with emotions; feeling oriented.	Student may be perceived as too emotional and immature; may be considered weak in cognitive skills.

Table 3

racial differences in innate, genetically determined abilities. What emerged from these findings, regarding schooling, were curricular modifications ensuring that the "intellectually inferior" and the social order would best be served by providing these students concrete, low-level, segregated instruction commensurate with their alleged diminished intellectual abilities (p. 38).

The deficit orientation was recently revived by the publication of *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). Seeking to influence public and social policy, Herrnstein and Murray interpreted (or misinterpreted and misrepresented) their data, like those of earlier centuries, so as to confirm prejudices. As Gould (1981) noted, the hereditary theory of IQ is a home-grown American product that persists in current practices of testing, sorting, and discarding.

Menchaca (1997) also traced the evolution of deficit thinking, and demonstrated how it influenced segregation in schools (e.g., *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896) and resistance to desegregation during the Civil Rights era and today. For instance, some scholars conclude that educators continue to resist desegregation, and they use tracking and ability grouping to resegregate students racially (e.g., Oakes, 1985; Slavin, 1987). That is, some educators argue that the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education (and their overrepresentation in special education) relate strongly to efforts to perpetuate school segregation (e.g., Ford & Webb, 1995; Hilliard, 1992).

In the sections that follow, we discuss how deficit orientations influence, directly and indirectly, a myriad of gifted education practices and, specifically, limits access to gifted edu-

cation for diverse students. This information presents a synopsis of critical issues related to the recruitment and retention of Black students in gifted education. The list is far from exhaustive; instead, it presents an overview of seven major symptoms of deficit thinking:

- (1) traditional IQ-based definitions, philosophies, and theories of giftedness;
- (2) identification practices and policies that have a disproportionately negative impact on Black students (e.g., a reliance on teacher referral for initial screening);
- (3) a lack of training aimed at helping educators in the area of gifted education;
- (4) a lack of training aimed at helping teachers understand and interpret standardized test results;
- (5) inadequate training of teachers and other school personnel in multicultural education;
- (6) inadequate efforts to communicate with Black families and communities about gifted education; and
- (7) Black students' decisions to avoid gifted education programs.

Testing and Assessment Issues

The use of tests to identify and assess students is, of course, pervasive in gifted education. Test scores play a dominant role in identification and placement decisions. For example, a study by VanTassel-Baska, Patton, and Prillaman (1989) revealed that 88.5% of states rely primarily on standardized, norm-referenced tests to identify gifted students, including those from economically and culturally diverse groups. More than 90% of school districts use these test scores (Colangelo & Davis, 1997; Davis & Rimm, 1997). This near-exclusive reliance on test scores for placement decisions keeps the demographics of gifted programs resolutely

White and middle class. While traditional intelligence tests, more or less, effectively identify and assess White students, they have been less effective with African American students. This raises the question: Why do we continue to use these tests so exclusively and extensively? Educators can choose from at least three explanations for the poor test performance of Black students: (1) the fault rests within the test (e.g., test bias); (2) the fault rests with the educational environment (e.g., poor instruction and lack of access to high quality education contributes to poor test scores); or (3) the fault rests with (or within) the student (e.g., he/she is cognitively inferior or "culturally deprived").

Educators who select the first two viewpoints would feel an obligation to make substantive changes in assessment and educational practices. These views consider the influence of the environment on test performance. However, the last explanation rests in deficit thinking. It is an example of blaming the victim. Educators who support this view abdicate any responsibility for minority students' lower test scores (see Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1981; Rushton & Ankney, 2000) because of the belief that genetics determines intelligence, and that intelligence is static.

IQ-based definitions and theories. Little agreement exists among educators regarding how best to define the terms "intelligent" or "gifted." Cassidy and Hossler (1992) found that most states continue to follow the 1978 (or older) federal definition of gifted. They use either the 1978 federal definition outright or a modification; 30 states had made no definitional revisions in at least a decade; and only 15 states had made revisions between 1987 and 1992. Essentially, most states continue to define giftedness unidimensionally—as a function of high IQ scores. IQ or test-

"acting White." Further, Steele found that the test performance of Black students can be hindered by what he calls "stereotype threat" in which Black students are overcome by anxiety during test-taking situations such that their performance suffers. Thus, gifted African American students may underachieve deliberately, refuse to be assessed for gifted education services, and refuse placement in gifted programs.

Recommendations for Change: Beyond Deficit Ideologies

"Schools must eliminate barriers to the participation of economically disadvantaged and minority students in services for students with outstanding talents... and must develop strategies to serve students from underrepresented groups" (USDE, 1993, p. 28).

To recruit and retain African American students in gifted education more effectively, educators must, clearly, shed deficit thinking. This attitudinal or philosophical change increases the probability that educators will adopt contemporary theories and definitions of giftedness, use culturally sensitive instruments, identify and serve gifted underachievers, provide all their students with a multicultural education, provide all staff members with multicultural preparation, and seek strong home-school partnerships. (See Table 4.)

Adopt Contemporary Theories and Definitions

A number of theories of intelligence and giftedness exist, but two appear to capture the strengths, abilities, and promise of gifted Black learners. Sternberg's (1985) Triarchic Theory of Intel-

ligence proposes that intelligence reveals itself in at least three ways: componentially, experientially, and contextually. Componential learners are analytical and abstract thinkers who do well on standardized tests and in school. Experiential learners value creativity and enjoy novelty. They dislike rules and follow few of their own; they see rules as inconveniences meant to be broken. Contextual learners readily adapt to their environments (a skill IQ tests fail to measure). They are street-smart survivors, socially competent and practical, but they may do poorly in school.

Gardner (1983) distinguished among seven types of intelligences—linguistics, logical-mathematical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, bodily kinesthetic, spatial, and musical—each of which entails distinct forms of perception, memory, and other psychological processes. In his Theory of Multiple Intelligences, Gardner defined intelligence as the ability to solve problems or to fashion products valued in one or more cultural settings.

These two broad and comprehensive, flexible and inclusive theories contend that giftedness is a social construct that manifests itself in many ways and means different things for different cultural groups. The theorists acknowledge the multifaceted, complex nature of intelligence and how current tests (which are too simplistic and static) fail to do justice to this construct. In addition, the USDE's (1993) most recent definition of gifted also broadens notions of giftedness:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the *potential* for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age,

experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capacity in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, and unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. *Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor* (p. 19, emphases added).

The italicized passages should resonate among those responsible for recruiting Black students into gifted education. First, the notion of talent development is a major focus of the definition. It recognizes that many students are diamonds in the rough who have had inadequate opportunities to develop and perform at high academic levels. For example, some gifted Black students, especially those who live in poverty, may lack exposure to books and other literature, they may not visit libraries or bookstores, and they miss out on other meaningful educational experiences.⁴ The definition also recognizes that some students face more barriers in life than others, including discrimination.

The inclusion of "potential" in the federal definition appears to recognize an obligation to serve those students who have, for whatever reasons, yet to manifest their abilities. These students may include underachievers, minority youngsters, economically disadvantaged students, and students with special education needs. Finally, the definition wisely reminds educators that giftedness exists among all sociodemographic groups—even among poor children.

Suggestions for Change: From Traditional to Contemporary Beliefs and Practices

Gifted Education Considerations	Traditional Beliefs and Practices	Contemporary Beliefs and Practices
Focus of testing	Focus solely on identification, which does not suggest how to meet students' needs.	Focus on assessment that is diagnostic and prescriptive.
Emphasis on testing	One test is sufficient to identify gifted students. One number (IQ or achievement test score) identifies gifted students. The best measure of giftedness is a test.	Giftedness is multidimensional; therefore, multiple methods (qualitative and quantitative) are used, and information is gathered from multiple sources (teachers, parents, community members, etc.). No "one size fits all" test exists.
Perception about giftedness and test scores	Giftedness is equated with a high IQ or achievement score. A cutoff score determines giftedness.	The limitations of test scores are recognized, especially among culturally diverse students. Gifted students can have low test scores.
Views about ability and effort	Ability is rewarded; students must demonstrate their ability.	Effort is valued and rewarded. Educators recognize that high quality educational experiences can help students reach their potential.

Table 4

⁴ Accordingly, the federal definition recognizes that students coming from high SES homes are likely to have such opportunities, which is likely to contribute to the demonstration of their giftedness.

Third, students in the gifted program should closely represent the community's demographics. That is, students of diverse backgrounds should be equitably represented according to criteria such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status. The reasons for the disparities must be evaluated and decreased. Similarly, there should be evidence of increasing diversity among professionals in the gifted program.

Fourth, the school district should provide opportunities for continuing professional development in gifted and multicultural education. More specifically, faculty members and other school personnel must be encouraged and given opportunities by administrators to participate in workshops, conferences, university courses, and so forth. Likewise, there must be a library for teachers and students that contains up-to-date multicultural resources (e.g., newsletters, journals, and books).

Fifth, there should be mechanisms that assess and address the affective and psychological needs of minority students (e.g., social and emotional needs, racial identity, environmental and risk factors). Sixth, schools will need to examine how and how much families are involved in the formal learning process. African American families need to be encouraged to become and remain involved. Efforts to create home-school partnerships should be ongoing.

Seventh, curriculum and instruction need to be grounded in multiculturalism. The curriculum needs to pluralistic (i.e., does it reflect diversity relative to ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other sociodemographic variables?). The curriculum should provide genuine options for all students to understand diverse cultures. Finally, policies should be in place to support multiculturalism and diversity. More specifically, published policies regarding multiculturalism are needed and school personnel must be held accountable for implementing these policies.

Summary

Controversy exists regarding the reasons that Black students are underrepresented in gifted education. The controversy focuses on whether the causes include deficiencies in the children and their families, or discriminatory practices of schools and society that restrict the search for, and discovery of, minority talent. As we have argued, decisions about giftedness are never more than predictions; therefore, wide nets should

be thrown to increase the power of those predictions. We should err on the side of inclusion rather than exclusion (e.g., Passow & Frasier, 1996).

The persistent and pervasive underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education is a tragedy. Black students are unidentified as gifted for many reasons. Accordingly, they receive an inappropriate education. We can attribute much of the difficulty to the deficit thinking that persists in education because deficit thinking limits access and opportunity. One can, however, take proactive and aggressive steps to rectify this mindset and its consequences. For instance, designing, adapting, modifying, and extending instruments, strategies, and procedures that take into account the influence of ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status on behavior improves greatly upon traditional identification approaches (Passow & Frasier, 1996, p. 201). The ultimate challenge is to create paradigms that take culture and context into account to enhance possibilities for diverse students. As an ad for the United Negro College Fund says, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." Should deficit thinking orientations continue, many more gifted Black students will atrophy in their schools, and their schools will be at fault. A mind is also a terrible thing to erase.

REFERENCES

- Banks, J. A. (1999). *Introduction to multicultural education* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Banks, J. A., & Banks, C. A. M. (Eds.). (1995). *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Boykin, A. W. (1994). Afrocentric expression and its implications for schooling. In E. R. Hollins, J. E. King, & W. C. Hayman (Eds.), *Teaching diverse populations: Formulating a knowledge base* (pp. 225-273). New York: State University of New York Press.
- Brown v. Board of Educ., 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
- Cassidy, J., & Hessler, A. (1992). State and federal definitions of the gifted: An update. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 15, 46-53.
- Clark, R. M. (1983). *Family life and school achievement: why poor Black children succeed or fail*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Colangelo, N., & Davis, G. A. (1997). *Handbook of gifted education*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Cox, J., Daniel, N., & Boston, B. (1985). *Educating able learners*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Davis, G. A., & Rimm, S. B. (1997). *Education of the gifted and talented*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Educational Policies Commission. (1950). *Education of the gifted*. Washington, DC: National Education Association and American Association of School Administrators.
- Ford, D. Y. (1993). An investigation into the paradox of underachievement among gifted, above-average, and average Black students. *Roeper Review*, 16, 78-84.
- Ford, D. Y. (1995). A study of underachievement among gifted, potentially gifted, and general education students. Storrs, CT: University of Connecticut, National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.
- Ford, D. Y. (1996). *Reversing underachievement among gifted Black students: Promising practices and programs*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ford, D. Y. (1998). The underrepresentation of minority students in gifted education: Problems and promises in recruitment and retention. *The Journal of Special Education*, 32, 4-14.
- Ford, D. Y. (1999). *Factors affecting the career decision making of minority teachers in gifted education*. Storrs, CT: The University of Connecticut, National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.
- Ford, D. Y., & Harris, J. J., III. (1999). *Multicultural gifted education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ford, D. Y., Grantham, T. C., & Harris, J. J., III. (1998). Multicultural gifted education: A wakeup call to the profession. *Roeper Review*, 19, 72-78.
- Ford, D. Y., Howard, T. C., Harris, J. J., III, & Tyson, C. A. (2000). Creating culturally responsive classrooms for gifted minority students. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 23(4), 397-427.
- Ford, D. Y., & Webb, K. (1995). Desegregating gifted education: A need unmet. *Journal of Negro Education*, 64, 52-62.
- Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the burden of "acting white". *The Urban Review*, 18, 176-206.
- Frasier, M. M., Garcia, J. H., & Passow, A. H. (1995). A review of assessment issues in gifted education and their implications for identifying gifted minority students. The University of Connecticut: National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.
- Frasier, M. M., & Passow, A. H. (1994). *Toward a new paradigm for identifying talent potential*. The University of Connecticut: National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gould, S. J. (1981). *The mismeasure of man*. New York: Norton.
- Gould, S. J. (1995). *The mismeasure of man* (revised ed.). New York: Norton.
- Hale-Benson, J. (1986). *Black children: Their roots, culture, and learning styles*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Harris, J. J., III, & Ford, D. Y. (1991). Identifying and nurturing the promise of gifted Black students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 60, 3-18.
- Helm, J. E. (1992). Racial identity in the school environment. In P. Pedersen & J. C. Carey (Eds.), *Multicultural counseling in schools: A practical handbook* (pp. 19-37). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Herrnstein, R. J., & Murray, C. (1994). *The bell curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life*. New York: Free Press.
- Hilliard, A. G., III. (1992). The pitfalls and promises of special education practice. *Exceptional Children*, 49(4), 168-172.
- Jacob K. Javits Act. (1988). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Jenkins, M. D. (1936). A socio-psychological study of Negro children of superior intelligence. *Journal of Negro Education*, 5, 175-190.
- Jensen, A. R. (1981). Raising the IQ: The Ramey and Haskins study. *Intelligence*, 5, 29-40.
- Karnes, M. B., Shwedel, A. M., & Steinberg, D. (1984). Styles of parenting among young gifted children. *Roeper Review*, 6, 232-235.
- Kaufman, A. S. (1994). *Intelligent testing with the WISC-III*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Menchaca, M. (1997). Early racist discourses: The roots of deficit thinking. In R. Valencia (Ed.), *The evolution of deficit thinking* (pp. 13-40). New York: Falmer.
- National Association for Gifted Children. (1997). Position paper on standardized testing. Washington, DC: Author.
- Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Passow, A. H., & Frasier, M. M. (1996). Toward improving identification of talent potential among minority and disadvantaged students. *Roeper Review*, 18, 198-202.
- Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537, 16 S. Ct. 1138; 41 L. Ed. 256 (1896).
- Rushton, J. P., & Ankney, C. D. (2000). Size matters: A review and new analyses of racial differences in cranial capacity and intelligence that refute Kamin and Omari. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 29, 591-620.
- Saccuzzo, D. P., Johnson, N. E., & Guertin, T. L. (1994). *Identifying underrepresented disadvantaged gifted and talented children: A multifaceted approach* (vols. 1 & 2). San Diego: San Diego State University.
- Scott-Jones, D. (1987). Mother-as-teacher in the families of high- and low-achieving low-income Black first graders. *Journal of Negro Education*, 56, 21-34.
- Shade, B. J., Kelly, C., & Oberg, M. (1997). *Creating culturally responsive classrooms*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Slavin, R. E. (1987). Ability grouping: A best-evidence synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*, 57, 293-336.
- Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape the intellectual identities and performance of women and African Americans. *American Psychologist*, 52, 613-629.
- Sternberg, R. J. (1985). *Beyond IQ: A triarchic theory of human intelligence*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Suskind, R. (1998). *A hope in the unseen: An American odyssey from the inner city to the Ivy League*. New York: Broadway.
- U.S. Department of Education. (1993). *National excellence: A case for developing America's talent*. Washington, DC: Author.
- VanTassel-Baska, J., Patton, J., & Prillaman, D. (1989). Disadvantaged gifted learners at-risk for educational attention. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 22, 1-16.
- Wechsler, D. (1991). *Manual for the Wechsler Intelligence Scale* (3rd ed.). San Antonio, TX: Author.